

Signs of Dyslexia

Parents should be mindful of their child's reading ability. Their vigilance can help detect problems that may not be obvious in a school setting. The following excerpt is taken from *Overcoming Dyslexia* by Sally Shaywitz and may be helpful as a handout for parents.

Signs of Dyslexia

Just as a parent would not think of ignoring her child's scheduled physical with his pediatrician, every parent should regularly observe her child reading. Given the high prevalence of reading difficulties, it is more likely for your child to have a reading problem than almost any other physical problem for which he is being checked.

You should read with your child as often as possible, at least several evenings a week. Part of that time should be devoted to hearing your child read to you. Listening to your child read prevents a problem from developing without your knowledge; moreover, it's fun....

Listen carefully as your child begins to read. For a first grader, is there evidence that he is trying, although imperfectly, to link letters with sounds? . . . [Is he] matching sounds to letters in each position in a small word (beginning, end, and middle)[?] He should also be recognizing common letter groups [(blends, digraphs, etc.) and patterns (silent e words, adjacent vowels, etc.)].

By second grade his basic tools for reading should be in place. In particular, second grade should see the emergence of a child's ability to read easy multisyllabic words (such as rabbit, butter, and sleepy). This important step involves paying attention to the individual parts within the word. . . . He is...[recognizing] the inner details of longer words as well.... You should be concerned if your second grader is not yet sounding out words, is taking wild stabs at words, is not able to read new or unfamiliar grade-level words, has not yet penetrated the inside of a word when he is reading, cannot decode most single or some easy multisyllabic words, is not building a vocabulary of words that he can read fluently, or doesn't seem to enjoy reading....

As your child progresses through third and higher grades, your focus shifts from wondering if she is learning to read to wanting to know if she is learning to read a critical core of words fluently. Reading is changing in character now. Words are more complicated, and there are many more of them. In class the emphasis is less on teaching reading than on using reading to gain information. It is therefore easy to understand why reading problems are so often diagnosed for the first time in third grade. Since dyslexic readers often do not use a decoding strategy to identify a word and instead rely heavily on the surrounding context to figure out

its meaning, you should notice if your child uses word substitutions; these replacement words make sense in the context of the passage, but do not resemble the pronunciation of the original word. For example, a child might read car for automobile. Making repeated substitutions is a sure sign that the reader is using context to guess at the meaning of words she has been unable to decode....

Pay attention to the overall rhythm of her reading. Is it smooth or hesitant? She should be reading most of the words on the page fluently. . . . Slow or choppy oral reading with words omitted, substituted, or misspoken are important clues that a third grader is not on track for becoming a skilled reader....

Poor spelling is often a sign of dyslexia. Spelling and reading are intimately linked; to spell correctly a child relies on his stored representations of a word, and these are imperfect in dyslexia. Spelling difficulties may be an indication that the child is not paying attention to all the letters in a word and not storing that word correctly....

Handwriting [can] be an important clue to dyslexia. Children who are dyslexic frequently have abominable handwriting—a problem that continues into adulthood. This difficulty reflects the dyslexic child's problem of appreciating the sounds that make up a word....

Bright dyslexic adolescents love to think, but for them it's hard to take in the raw material—the printed words—that serve as the source of inspiration for new ideas. They must devote their full concentration to decoding words instead of attending to issues of comprehension. Reflecting the lack of fluency, they read slowly.... The lack of fluency causes significant problems for dyslexic adolescents as they try to cope with large volumes of written work. For example, homework assignments are often incomplete or take a great deal of time to complete. Fluency is what binds a reader to the text. If a child cannot effortlessly decode a critical mass of words on the page, he cannot engage the text. He'll be at odds with it....

Reading for [a dyslexic child] is fragile, and the process can be disrupted at any moment. Any little sound that draws his attention away from the page is a threat to his ability to maintain his reading. . . . Dyslexic readers often require an extremely quiet room in which to do their reading or to take tests....

Persistent difficulties in learning a foreign language provide an important clue that a student may be dyslexic....

One final clue to dyslexia in children and adults alike: . . . they are in pain. Dyslexia inflicts pain. It represents a major assault on self-esteem. [Dyslexic students may have] a reluctance to attend school or moodiness or spoken expressions such as "I'm dumb" . . .

The key to success and to avoiding much of this frustration is to recognize dyslexia as early as possible, even before a child is expected to begin to read. . . . The clues you have just read about can alert you to the possibility that a person you know is dyslexic. The presence of several of these clues is a sign that you need to take the next step: consider a more systematic and formal evaluation for dyslexia.

Shaywitz, Sally. 2003. *Overcoming Dyslexia*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 112–119

Clues to Dyslexia

One of the very first clues to dyslexia may be delayed language. Once a child begins to speak, look for the following problems:

The Preschool Years

- Trouble learning common nursery rhymes such as “Jack and Jill” and “Humpty Dumpty”
- A lack of appreciation of rhymes
- Mispronounced words: persistent baby talk
- Difficulty in learning (and remembering) names of letters
- Failure to know the letters in his own name

Kindergarten and First Grade

- Failure to understand that words come apart; for example, that “batboy” can be pulled apart into “bat” and “boy” and, later on, that the word “bat” can be broken down still further and sounded out as ‘b’ ‘aaa’ ‘t’.
- Inability to learn to associate letters with sounds, such as being unable to connect the letter b with the /b/ sound.
- Reading errors that show no connection to the sounds of the letters; for example, the word “big” is read as “goat.”
- The inability to read common one-syllable words or to sound out even the simplest of words, such as “mat,” “cat,” “hop,” “nap.”
- Complaints about how hard reading is, or running and hiding when it is time to read
- A history of reading problems in parents or siblings

In addition to the problems of speaking and reading, you should be looking for these indications of strengths in high-level thinking processes:

- Curiosity
- A great imagination
- The ability to figure things out
- Eager embrace of new ideas

- Getting the gist of things
- A good understanding of new concepts
- Surprising maturity
- A large vocabulary for the age group
- Enjoyment in solving puzzles
- Talent at building models
- Excellent comprehension of stories read or told to him

Clues to Dyslexia From Second Grade On

Problems in Speaking

- Mispronunciation of long, unfamiliar, or complicated words; the fracturing of words: leaving out parts of words or confusing the order of the parts of words, for example, “aluminum” becomes “amulium”
- Speech that is not fluent: pausing or hesitating often when speaking, lots of “um”s during speech, no glibness
- The use of imprecise language, such as vague references to “stuff” or “things” instead of the proper name of an object
- Not being able to find the exact word, such as confusing words that sound alike: saying “tornado” instead of “volcano,” substituting “lotion” for “ocean,” or “humanity” for “humidity”
- The need for time to summon an oral response or the inability to come up with a verbal response quickly when questioned
- Difficulty in remembering isolated pieces of verbal information (rote memory): trouble remembering dates, names, telephone numbers, random lists

Problems in Reading

- Very slow progress in acquiring reading skills
- The lack of a strategy to read new words
- Trouble reading unknown (new, unfamiliar) words that must be sounded out; making wild stabs or guesses at reading a word; failure to systematically sound out words
- The inability to read small “function” words such as “that,” “an,” “in.”
- Stumbling on reading multi-syllable words, or the failure to come close to sounding out the full word
- Omitting parts of words when reading; the failure to decode parts within a word, as if someone had chewed a hole in the middle of the word, such as “conible” for “convertible.”
- A terrific fear of reading out loud; the avoidance of oral reading
- Oral reading filled with substitutions, omissions, and mispronunciations
- Oral reading that is choppy and labored, not smooth or fluent
- Oral reading that lacks inflection and sounds like the reading of a foreign language

- A reliance on context to discern the meaning of what is read
- A better ability to understand words in context than to read isolated single words
- Disproportionately poor performance on multiple choice tests
- The inability to finish tests on time
- The substitution of words with the same meaning for words in the text he can't pronounce, such as "car" for "automobile."
- Disastrous spelling, with words not resembling true spelling (some spellings may be missed by spell check)
- Trouble reading mathematics word problems
- Reading that is very slow and tiring
- Homework that never seems to end, or with parents often recruited as readers
- Messy handwriting despite what may be an excellent facility at word processing—nimble fingers
- Extreme difficulty learning a foreign language
- A lack of enjoyment in reading, and the avoidance of reading books or even a sentence
- The avoidance of reading for pleasure, which seems too exhausting
- Reading whose accuracy improves over time, though it continues to lack fluency and is laborious
- Lowered self-esteem, with pain that is not always visible to others
- A history of reading, spelling, and foreign language problems in family members

In addition to signs of a phonologic weakness, there are signs of strengths in high-level thinking processes:

Signs of Strengths in Higher-Level Thinking Processes

- Excellent thinking skills: conceptualization, reason, imagination, abstraction
- Learning that is accomplished best through meaning rather than rote memorization
- Ability to get the "big picture"
- A high level of understanding of what is read to him
- The ability to read and to understand at a high level over-learned (that is, highly practiced) words in a special area of interest; for example, if his hobby is restoring cars, he may be able to read auto mechanics magazines.
- Improvement as an area of interest becomes more specialized and focused when he develops a miniature vocabulary that he can read
- A surprisingly sophisticated listening vocabulary
- Excellence in areas not dependent on reading, such as math, computers, and visual arts, or excellence in more conceptual (versus factoid-driven)

subjects such as philosophy, biology, social studies, neuroscience, and creative writing

Clues to Dyslexia in Young Adults and Adults

Problems in Speaking

- Persistence of earlier oral language difficulties
- The mispronunciation of the names of people and places, and tripping over parts of words
- Difficulty remember names of people and places and the confusion of names that sound alike
- A struggle to retrieve words: “It was on the tip of my tongue”
- Lack of glibness, especially if put on the spot
- Spoken vocabulary that is smaller than listening vocabulary, and hesitation to say aloud words that might be mispronounced

Problems in Reading

- A childhood history of reading and spelling difficulties
- Word reading becomes more accurate over time but continues to require great effort
- Lack of fluency
- Embarrassment caused by oral reading; the avoidance of Bible study groups, reading at Passover Seders, or delivering a written speech
- Trouble reading and pronouncing uncommon, strange, or unique words such as people’s names, street or location names, food dishes on a menu (often resorting to asking the waiter about the special of the day or resorting to saying, “I’ll have what he’s having,” to avoid the embarrassment of not being able to read the menu)
- Persistent reading problems
- The substitution of made-up words during reading for words that cannot be pronounced—for example, “metropolitan” becomes “mitan”—and a failure to recognize the word “metropolitan” when it is seen again or heard in a lecture the next day
- Extreme fatigue from reading
- Slow reading of most materials: books, manuals, subtitles in foreign films
- Penalized by multiple-choice tests
- Unusually long hours spent reading school or work-related materials
- Frequent sacrifice of social life for studying
- A preference for books with figures, charts, or graphics
- A preference for books with fewer words per page or with lots of white showing on a page
- Disinclination to read for pleasure
- Spelling that remains disastrous and a preference for less complicated words in writing that are easier to spell

- Particularly poor performance on rote clerical tasks

Signs of Strengths in Higher-Level Thinking Processes

- The maintenance of strengths noted in the school-age period
- A high learning capability
- A noticeable improvement when given additional time on multiple-choice examinations
- Noticeable excellence when focused on a highly specialized area such as medicine, law, public policy, finance, architecture, or basic science
- Excellence in writing if content and not spelling is important
- A noticeable articulateness in the expression of ideas and feelings
- Exceptional empathy and warmth, and feeling for others
- Success in areas not dependent on rote memory
- A talent for high-level conceptualization and the ability to come up with original insights
- Big-picture thinking
- Inclination to think out of the box
- A noticeable resilience and ability to adapt

If you think your student has some of the above problems, it is important to note how frequent they are and how many there are. You don't need to worry about isolated clues or clues that appear very rarely. For you to be concerned the symptoms must be persistent; anyone can mispronounce a word now and then, or confuse similar-sounding words occasionally. What you are looking for is a persistent pattern: the occurrence of a number of these symptoms over a prolonged period of time.